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# ABERCROMBIE, QUEEN OF THE BOHEMIAN ARTISTS

NO ARTSPEAK, NO MANIFESTOS, NO ABSTRACTIONS, NO PRETENSION.

April 14, 2017 By [Donna Seaman](#)

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*I paint the way I do because I'm just plain scared.*

*I mean, I think it's a scream that we're alive at all—don't you?*

—Gertrude Abercrombie

A girl walks across a barren yet somehow vital and stirring landscape beneath an overcast sky marked with dark, winged clouds and illuminated by a brilliantly bright full moon. Her arms are lost within a black blob of a jacket; her green, knee-length skirt is brushy and in motion. She is wearing black flats, and a little brimmed black hat perches on her brown, blunt-cut, shoulder-length hair. She is leaning forward, left to right, as is a large forked dead tree behind her. Its spare, dark, calligraphic limbs signal to the lone traveler. Behind it is a small, boxy blue building with a black door and two square windows. The building, the tree, and the young woman cast moon shadows, while in the distance, the benevolent lunar light caresses a tightly

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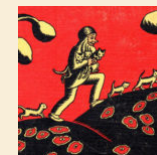
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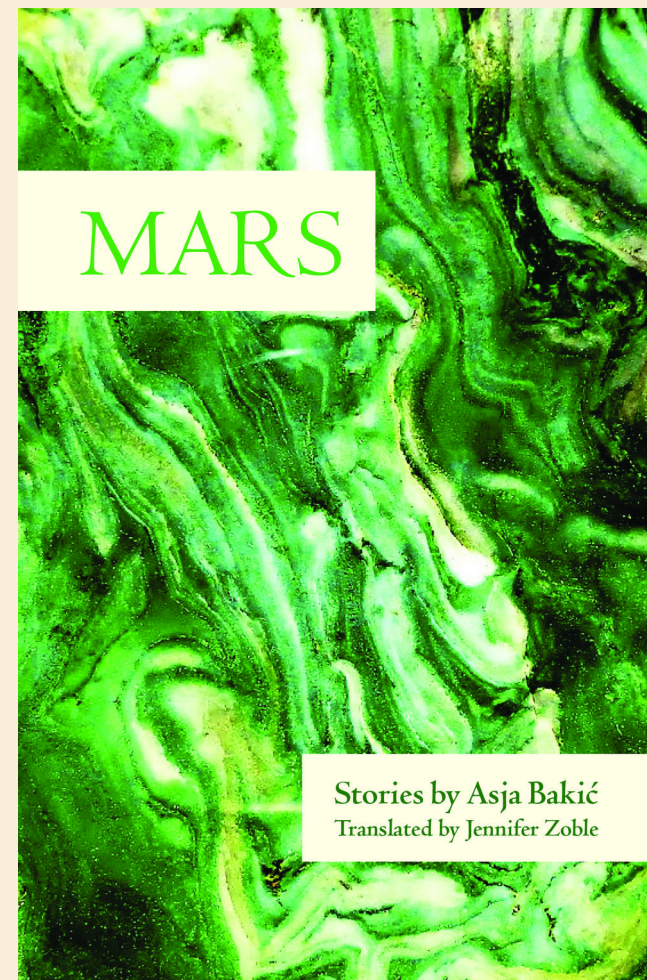
circled, even huddled grove of trees. The green of their clustered crowns echoes the green of the girl's skirt. Her face is minimally indicated; her large dark eyes predominate. The arresting simplicity and starkness, silence and vigilance, of this small, dark painting invite the viewer to see this young woman's solitary, meditative nocturnal walk as an archetypal journey, a coming-of-age quest. Intriguing in its alchemical mix of the obvious and the mysterious, *Girl Searching* is an essential piece in Gertrude Abercrombie's unique and transfixing autobiography-in-paintings.

Abercrombie was 36 years old when she painted *Girl Searching* in 1945. An established Chicago artist, a wife, and a mother, she was still searching for clarity and freedom to be fully herself. Abercrombie did not feel entirely comfortable in her own skin. She was not confident about love, marriage, or motherhood. She was insecure, often blue, lonely, angry, irascible, and narcissistic. She worked avidly, desperately, and defensively. Painting was her calling, her sanctuary, her armor, her therapy, her antidepressant, and her currency. Her reason for being. Her lifeline. Her promise of posterity. Abercrombie drank too much and altogether neglected her health. Her closest friends were gay men; she kept her distance from other women. She fed her cats more lavishly than her human friends. She had a sly, biting sense of humor and a zest for parties and mischief. She was musically gifted and wild for jazz. She hosted now-legendary jam sessions at her three-story

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Victorian brownstone in Chicago's lakefront Hyde Park neighborhood on the South Side near the University of Chicago. Over the 15 years following her creation of *Girl Searching*, Abercrombie funneled joy and agony into hundreds of provocative paintings instantly recognizable as hers. She exhibited regularly, cruised the city in her vintage Rolls-Royce, and was featured in newspapers and magazines as journalists reveled in her enigmatic, even spooky art and her colorful life. Abercrombie's cherished title, Queen of the Bohemian Artists, was well-earned.

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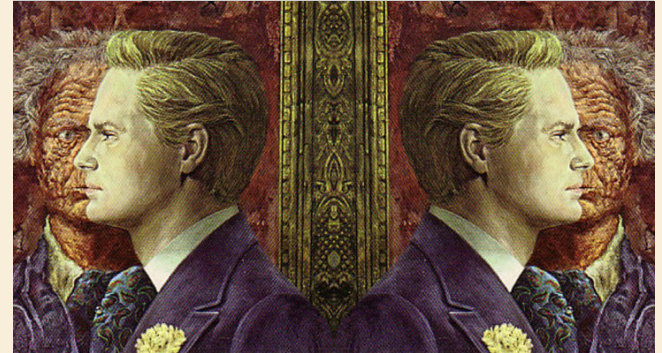




Gertrude Abercrombie, *The Queen*, 1954.

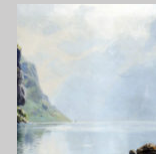
Artist, curator, and influential champion of Chicago artists Don Baum became a close and trusted friend of Abercrombie and, eventually, the executor of her estate. He described her as “very funny” and “grouchy” and

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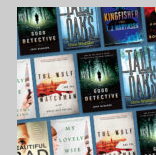
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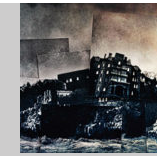
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“very introspective.” He vividly remembers her house percolating with the energy of all kinds of people, jazz, art, and cats. Hers was a dynamic, unconventional household sustained by lodgers who ranged from University of Chicago students to renowned musicians and composers. “She played the piano, you know,” Baum recalled, “and there was nothing she liked more than to sit down at the piano with somebody like Dizzy or Miles standing near her playing their instruments. It was pretty wild.”

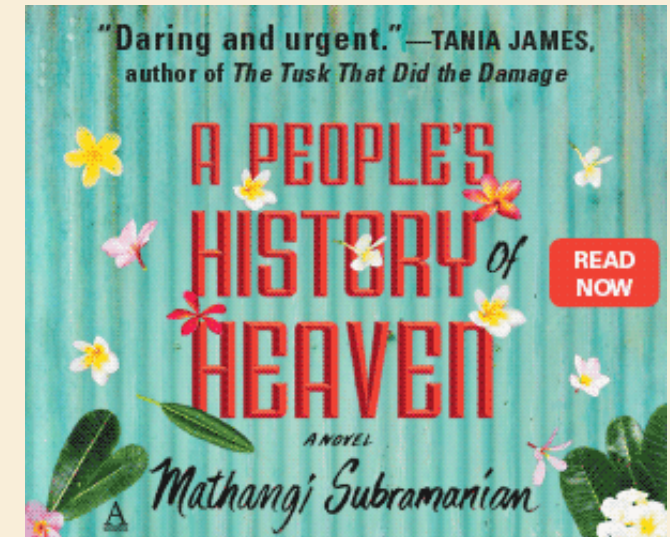
Abercrombie’s daughter, Dinah, her one child, sounding pretty jazzy herself, remembered her mother during these sessions: “She was gay and radiant at these. Yes, she was the center. She was happy and expansive and had wonderful exchanges with all these people. She was blooming, she was flying . . . and the sound of her laughter would float over the music and carry the party into her sky . . . She would be sailing in her element and this was her glory and this was in her paintings, too.”

Abercrombie’s natural “element” also included a veritable fountain of booze flowing beneath a haze of tobacco and marijuana smoke. Among Abercrombie’s papers are photographs and letters documenting her close, loving friendships with frequent guests Dizzy Gillespie and Sonny Rollins. In his memoir *What Is What Was* (2002), Chicago writer Richard Stern records his University of Chicago colleague, Nobel laureate Saul Bellow,



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reminiscing, “It was wonderful then, good old Bohemian Chicago. I got in with Gertrude Abercrombie [the painter] and her crowd.” Among the artist’s papers is a note from the one and only Chicago-based oral historian and radio host, Studs Terkel: “To Queen Gertrude, You are regal—And we love you—Studs.”

Photographs do not exactly confirm Abercrombie’s regality. She does look thoughtful and self-possessed, and there are some elegant photographs of her and her handsome first husband, Robert Livingston. There are also some stylishly staged shots of the earnest artist seated before an easel, brush in hand, as though she’s hard at work on a large self-portrait, in spite of being absurdly overdressed for the messiness of oil painting. And the painting is set within a large, showy frame; clearly it had been completed long before the photo shoot. No doubt impish Gertrude found this fakery hilarious. In other shots she looks shy, even apologetic. You can tell that she’s rueful about her looks as she mugs and clowns for the judgmental camera. Pictures taken at parties capture her poised, attractive, camera-wooing friends looking splendidly at ease, while Gertrude stares at the camera with chagrin, curiously childlike in her reluctant compliance with the lens’ demands. In one photograph she even lies flat on her back on the floor, ankles and wrists demurely crossed, while friends sit in a neatly composed group behind her, in perfect command of the situation while she,



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one assumes, pretends to have succumbed to way too much partying. Yet as fearful as she was of the pitiless camera, Abercrombie painted herself over and over again.

One of the most striking and seductive aspects of Abercrombie's oeuvre is her defining visual lexicon. Like a jazz musician improvising on certain rhythms, notes, and melodies, she riffs on a set of subjects, settings, objects, and colors that hold deeply personal and resonant meanings for her.

Abercrombie created an incantatory repertoire of flatlands, the full moon, bare trees, white boulders, boxy little houses, paths, towers, windows, nearly empty rooms, paintings within paintings, letters, gloves, telephones, seashells, chairs, a Victorian chaise lounge, vases, flowers, a pedestal, cats, owls, and horses. Her stark landscapes are occupied by tall, slender, and, yes, regal female figures clad in long, simple, even penitential gowns. These women have large, dark, deep-set feline eyes. Their stances and gestures are formal, as though they are onstage or performing a ritual or casting a spell or serving as witness or guide. These highly stylized tableaux, with their repeated symbols and magical motifs, give Abercrombie's paintings the look and aura of hieroglyphics or tarot cards.

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Her moody palette was just as carefully defined as her imagery. And though her distinctive twilight colors express her moods and feelings, they also mirror the Great Lakes light that makes the evening skies of northern Illinois and Chicago so unexpectedly luminescent, a redemptive spectrum of dusky grays, coral pinks, and precious turquoises gracing the grit of the city and the monotony of the featureless land. But the focus of Abercrombie's paintings are the longings and fears aroused by complex psychological quandaries. Her self-assigned mission was to issue meteorological reports from a stormy psyche.

The enigmatic themes, dreamy atmosphere, and thematic continuity of Abercrombie's work inspired critics to call her a Surrealist or a magic realist. And she agreed. On a scrap of paper she wrote, "Surrealism is meant for me because I am a pretty realistic person but don't like all I see. So I dream that it is changed. Then I change it to the way I want it. It is almost always pretty real. Only mystery and fantasy have been added. All foolishness has been taken out. It becomes my own dream. Others may or may not get it. Or dig it." And for all the mystery of her paintings, the artist talked about

them in the most matter-of-fact manner: “I am not interested in complicated things nor in the commonplace, I like to paint simple things that are a little strange. My work comes directly from my inner consciousness and it must come easily. It is a process of selection and reduction.” In 1952 Abercrombie told journalist Agnes Lynch, “I like to paint mysteries or fantasies—things that are real in the mind, but not real in the ordinary sense of the word.”

No artspeak for Abercrombie. No manifestos, no abstractions, no pretension. She disliked such discourse, and there was nothing intellectual about her aesthetics. She did acknowledge that the artists Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst, and Salvador Dali might have “something to do” with her work. Then she said, “But the big influence was the Belgian painter, [René] Magritte. When I saw his work, I said to myself, ‘There’s your daddy.’ And I’ve been working in that surrealist vein ever since.”

When Abercrombie talked to Studs Terkel about her work, she said, “Everything is autobiographical in a sense, but kind of dreamy.” She disingenuously played the role of the primitive and the unschooled, as in this passage from an article in *Chicago* magazine: “I always paint my face, I guess, when I paint people. It is the face I know best. And it’s really the easiest for me because, you know, it is sort of like putting on makeup.”



Gertrude Abercrombie, *Two Ladders*, 1947.

When Agnes Lynch interviewed Abercrombie at her home for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, she watched cats race around the artist's studio while the artist spoke about what Lynch described as Abercrombie's "restrained palette": "I think it is foolish to lay out all the colors on the palette indiscriminately," Miss Abercrombie said. "To me each color has a special meaning and until I "feel" a color in an artistic sense, I just don't use it. Purple seems to be my



new color, and I find it is getting into all my paintings.” Lynch introduces the artist’s nine-year-old daughter: “Dinah takes an active interest in her mother’s work, and it was she who helped to introduce a new color note in her mother’s paintings when she asked her sometime ago to ‘paint her a pink picture.’”

Abercrombie liked to tout her disinterest in technique as well as her lack of formal training. She never learned to properly use paints and other materials, and many of her paintings had to be painstakingly restored. As Don Baum observed, “She was no technician, believe me . . . She never really knew much about the craft of painting. It wasn’t about that. It was about making her strange images.” Abercrombie made the distinction between being a good painter and being a better artist, and it was the latter that she cared about. For her, making art was about emotion, perceptions, and ideas, not skill: “Something has to happen, and if nothing does, all the technique in the world won’t make it.”

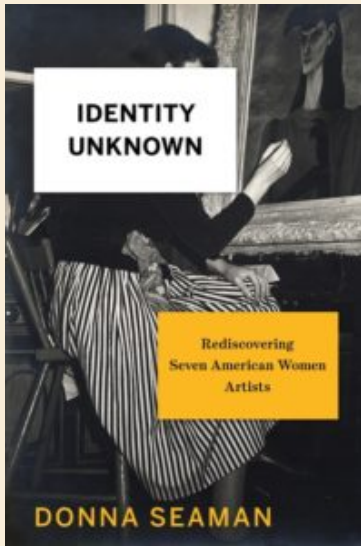
As stylized and iconic as most of the far-from-lifelike figures in her paintings are, Abercrombie was in fact a gifted and expressive portraitist. Among her earlier works are lush, looser, more painterly, colorful, natural, and multidimensional paintings of friends and family. She captured the nuance of her subjects’ temperaments, their living, breathing presence.

Abercrombie met writer Wendell Wilcox in 1934, when, as she wrote in her fragmented reminiscences, she was “recovering from a case of collapsed love.” The two became friends, and he later wrote, “It is a great pity that she did not do more portraits of other people. She is a very remarkable portrait painter. Some she painted out of love and some for friendship and a few on order for the sake of money. They are all remarkably revealing—too revealing to the people who contracted to buy them and to be salable. Some rejected them. But Abercrombie felt that portraiture was not truly a branch of art and she disliked practicing it.”

She was also, as others observed, just too darn self-involved to pay such concentrated attention to others. Even Abercrombie herself joked about her narcissism. She loved telling people, for example, about a postcard written by one friend, the artist Dudley Huppler, to another, the artist Karl Priebe: “Dear Karl, Took Gertrude to the Ballet last night. She didn’t like it. She wasn’t in it.” The primary reason Abercrombie lost interest in painting others was because she needed to paint herself to survive her increasingly daunting life.

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Donna Seaman is Editor, Adult Books, *Booklist*, a member of the advisory council for the American Writers Museum, and a recipient of the James Friend Memorial Award for Literary Criticism and the Studs Terkel Humanities Service Award. She has reviewed for the Chicago Tribune and Los Angeles Times, among others. She has written biocritical essays for the Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature and American Writers. Her author interviews are collected in *Writers on the Air: Conversations about Books*. She lives in Chicago.





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